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ABSTRACT

Rural school boards have a unique opportunity to impact education by involving teachers, administrators, and the community in policy development. To make policy an instrument of empowerment, policymakers should consider the following steps: (1) seeking information from any and all groups that the policy will affect to develop a statement about organizational growth; (2) write statements in the form of super-objectives giving a perspective of the individual's role in the total organizational setting; (3) distributing policies and collecting suggestions for refinement from the school board; and (4) receiving thorough input on all organizational levels culminating in a formal policy statement by the school board. Congruence of expectations and goals is necessary if boards of education wish to empower schools in developing programs and encouraging growth among its faculty. Empowerment is conducive to change because teachers and administrators work together toward common goals. Empowerment promotes positive community attitudes that reduce alienation and increase performance of both students and staff. Based on empowerment and shared decisionmaking, policy development has a greater capacity to fulfill its basic function of improving the learning environment for the learner. The continuing process of policy development and revision involving all constituencies becomes the leadership role of the local board of education. (LP)

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Policy as a Stimulant to Curricular Growth in Rural Education

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Policy as a Stimulant to Curricular Growth in Rural Education

Because of their relative intimacy with their constituencies, school boards in rural America have a unique opportunity to impact education.

The school board is the body that is legally designated to develop policy. But when it develops policy in isolation from individuals affected in the organization, it prevents the renewal that should be an outcome of policy development.

If policy is to become an instrument of empowerment for participants in rural education programs, policy makers should consider the steps below:

1. Seek information from any and all groups that the policy will affect. Information must be gathered with the objective of developing a statement that will create vision. The goal of the statement should be to create action in the direction of renewal.
2. Write statements in the form of super-objectives; each statement should give a perspective of the individual's role in the total organizational setting.
3. Distribute the policy throughout the organization. Members should discuss it, apply it, and send

suggestions for refinement to the Board. Faculty meetings may become a tool of this process.

4. Start the policy process at any point in the system. The proposed policy should receive thorough input on all levels, culminating in a policy statement by the legally constituted board.

The principle governing this process is that the policy statement is a statement of power: A statement that provides vision and empowerment. It should represent as closely as possible a congruence of expectations of all participants. The need for these steps is evidenced daily. Efforts of sincere educators must not be rebuffed by policy makers.

The following scenario demonstrates how incongruent perceptions can prevent growth and renewal. The Edgewood Elementary has an aggressive, committed principal and faculty. They agree on the concepts that govern site-based management of a school. This form of governance, as they see it, provides for greater individual autonomy for each individual within the context of consensus expectations. Faculty and students enjoy more individual freedom than most in their district. In many ways, their values and perceptions differ from those of their district's other schools.

The school faculty have verbal permission from the district office to move ahead and develop programs and

policies from their point of view. Programs do develop, and over time the programs begin to differ from the norm of the district. Patrons of the Edgewood School become aware of the differences, and though most are supportive, a vocal minority begins to question the variance from the norm. As a result, the vocal group presents a set of issues to the Board of Education.

Hearing the expressions of the group, the Board agrees to consider the issues. In reviewing the issues, they realize that Edgewood has departed from the perceived norm as written in the standard statements which control policy.

After considering relevant issues, the Board of Education asks Edgewood to return to the norm followed by other schools. The faculty of Edgewood interprets this directive as defeat for their creative effort. The Board has unknowingly contributed to a perception that creative effort is not of significance. Thus a negative tone is set in the district.

If a school board wishes to empower a school to take initiative in developing programs and to encourage renewal among its faculty, that board must be sure that there is congruence of expectation among the faculty and among all participants. If the Board of Education had functioned effectively as leaders, policies to empower Edgewood would have been in place and the school's efforts would not have

been misinterpreted. Trust and vision must be part of the culture of the system.

When a board of education invests its time in creating avenues for leadership to function as empowerment, the system is served; the role of the board of education as the leader of the system is enhanced. The values of the community are kept intact; thus health of the school and the community are nourished.

Purkey (1985) in his analysis of the literature of effective schools makes this observation:

> Recent research addresses these questions by suggesting that lasting change seeking to affect students' achievement is more likely to result from policies that encourage bottom-up school specific reform efforts. Grass-roots change such as this requires a participating approach to school improvement that relies on faculty collaboration and shared decision making.

Staffs traditionally have not had the authority or the opportunity to decide schoolwide policy on management issues (Dykes, et al. 1965).

Continuing his analysis of effective schools, Purkey explains:

> A synthesis of research suggests that school effectiveness is not likely to result from a small number of discrete

> changes imposed on schools by external agents. Rather, the organizational laxity of school and the resulting relative autonomy of teachers in the classroom indicate that school cohesiveness can be obtained through building staff agreement on and commitment to clearly commonly identified norms and goals. (Derr & Deal, 1979; Meyer and Rowan, 1978; Miles, 1982; Weick, 1976)

Research studies and emerging theories of organization support a "loosely coupled view of the link between policies and behavior at lower levels." In this interpretation, policy making "serves as an important ritual, convening or symbol. The importance derives from what is signaled, expressed or represented rather than from what is accomplished" (Meyer and Rowan, 1979).

Policy stated in the form of super-objectives based on ideas with power can meet the standards established by the findings of research as identified by such authors as Purkey, Deal, and others who have studied this process and approach. When policy statements become instruments of empowerment change attempts are more successful because teachers and administration work together, and collegiality breaks down barriers between departments and among teachers and administrators. The resultant intellectual sharing can lead to consensus and promote a sense of commonalty among the staff.

When empowerment takes place in schools, community feelings that result contribute to reduced alienation and increased performance of students and staff alike. When school staffs agree on their goals (e.g., academic achievement) and expectations (e.g., a standard for work and achievement from all students), they are more likely to be successful in channeling their energy and efforts toward a mutually supported purpose.

When perceived in this context, policy development has a greater capacity to fulfill its basic function: that of improving the learning environment for the learner. A policy statement should foster opportunities to enlighten the individual and to expand creativity and depth of thought in the community it serves.

In summary, if the leadership of the board of education could be a form of "leadership as . . . empowerment," the capacity for greater renewal within the system would be enhanced. The role of a board of education is rejuvenated as it performs its function as catalyst for empowerment.

James Allen (1971) said, "Let a man radically alter his thoughts and he will be astonished at the rapid transformation it will effect." As he thinks, so he is; as he continues to think, so he remains. Policy should create thought, thereby becoming

an important part of the transformation of the educational enterprise.

This form of leadership as a process of empowerment turns policy into an instrument of linkage; empowerment becomes the focus of the board's investment of time. The continuing process of policy development and revision involving all constituencies becomes the perspective of leadership of the role of the local board of education.

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